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By Gary L. Rose
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Sling shots, bows and arrows and even homemade catapults — typically the armaments of medieval warriors — have shown up on the front lines in Hong Kong, where angry student protesters have captured world attention by standing firm against Chinese authorities, their totalitarian policies and the Chinese government’s heavily armed and aggressive police force.

These brave and freedom-loving students are facing a ruthless Chinese regime bent on crushing the rights and liberties promised to Hong Kong after the Chinese province — once a thriving British colony — was returned to China in 1997. At that time, an explicit agreement between the British and the Chinese dictated that the people of Hong Kong would function autonomously for 50 years, enjoying a level of freedom well beyond that which was permitted to China’s massive population of over one billion people.

“One country, two systems” is the term that has repeatedly been evoked to describe the relationship between Hong Kong and Beijing: one political system under the control of a communist dictatorship, and one system that cherishes the liberties closely associated with the

western world. But the Chinese communist government is moving rapidly away from promises of freedom and autonomy toward one country, one system, with Beijing firmly in charge.

So far, the students of Hong Kong have valiantly defied Beijing's hegemonic objectives. This is despite Beijing's penchant for murdering students fighting for freedom, as the communist government did in the historic Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989. But China hardly holds a monopoly on tyrannical behavior. Countries across the world are being run by dictators, despots or governments happy to limit freedom, rig elections, oppress their citizens and get rich while the people they govern are starving, brutalized and dying.

Beyond Hong Kong's test of wills, another important question is whether this mass student embrace of democracy will migrate back across the globe to America, where students seem less interested in fighting tyranny and supporting human rights around the globe.

Traditionally in America, the college years are a time of experience and experiment and no stranger to controversy. Whether hosting rallies to end the Vietnam War, protect the environment, address civil or religious inequities or protest for justice, college campuses have long been a bailiwick for democratic movements and free expression, with students and faculty working together to draw attention to issues and outrages.

Recently, the world witnessed a young woman from Sweden stand against environmental inaction, speaking before the United Nations and rallying fellow students and supporters across the world. There have been women's rights marches in Washington, D.C., and across the United States, and high school students have kept pressure, to little avail, on politicians in Florida and on federal legislators to toughen gun laws. Speaking up isn't a new phenomenon; it just appears somewhat lacking at many of today's colleges as students seem reluctant or too busy to protest.

I'm not suggesting that focusing on degree programs and plans of study isn't important — that's the main reason we're here. But just as a liberal arts education is critical to a well-rounded individual, watching, learning and reacting to the world around us is equally important. It is up to us, as professors and administrators, to help students experience the satisfaction of taking a stand, in engaging in open dialogue, and in having a hand in decisions that will affect them, their peers, our country and the world, now and in the future.

I am disappointed by the ambivalence of American colleges and universities towards the plight of the Hong Kong freedom fighters. History has taught us that silence driven by fear, lack of interest or an unwillingness to take a stand can lead to cataclysmic consequences. Many among us take for granted our freedoms and liberties, but as we have seen over and over — and continue to see in countries around the world, including China, and even here in America — the line between freedom and repression is razor thin.

Students are our future leaders. They need to be aware of how the world around them is evolving and how freedom for many of the earth's inhabitants is precarious. College is more than just a place to earn a degree. Campuses are sanctums where democracy and leadership should be robustly debated and defended. The students of Hong Kong should not be standing alone — they need our voices, and they need our help.

